

## **Civics Summit for Educators – July 25, 2019 – Fort Pierre, SD**

### ***\*Organized notes from each of the original session discussion groups***

#### **SD DATA RELATED TO CIVICS EDUCATION DISCUSSION**

One of the first concerns of the groups was the lack of responses from the surveys. Many of the participants wondered about the relevance the survey offered to elementary and middle school teachers. Rather than just seeing responses from schools that are fully invested into Civics education, the goal of the group was to hear how *all* schools are incorporating Civics Education in order to build on and introduce new ideas for the future of Civics. How can Civics Education be made more relevant to the elementary and middle school level teachers? Overall, some teachers did not see the correlation between the test and the standards; for example, how is it decided, based on the Social Studies standards, what questions of the test are crucial for our students to know in today's world? Questions also arose as many of the survey results came from principals and school administrators instead of the teachers themselves.

Another concern was that, especially at the elementary level, there just isn't enough time for Social Studies. The question came about of the accuracy of time put down on the response; including time spent teaching other subject areas could've given a stronger perspective on the state of Social Studies in South Dakota schools. It was found to be hard for teachers to know where to start teaching as there is not sequence or scope to assist the Civics standards. Along with this, teachers were concerned that if the Naturalization Test was mandatory, they would eventually just be teaching to a test and their students would merely be memorizing answers instead of comprehending and applying the information from the test. Therefore, the group felt it was better for teachers to choose how to incorporate Civics in their own classroom in order to provide genuine learning experiences for students. However, many teachers feel that they are already incorporating Civics into their classroom with programs such as Character Counts or required community service hours. Several high school teachers also already incorporate the USCIS Naturalization Test into their curriculum without having students complete a required test; they feel this is successful enough and a required test isn't needed. With this being said, the group members believed that more of the Civics activities should be taking place during the actual Social Studies class time instead of before or after.

The next concern included the finding that many teachers feel unprepared to teach American Government because they have a history degree and not enough government background. Since so much of history is embedded in reading and writing, how can educators make content more hands-on for students to learn and apply their knowledge? Even though incorporating other disciplines in lessons is important, Social Studies standards, especially Civics, should not be hidden among other subject areas.

A worry among educators was also the lack of resources available when teaching Civics to elementary and middle school students (i.e. vocabulary, activities, newspapers, voting

simulations, etc.). More resources seem to be available in high school, but if the resources are not available earlier, students won't have the knowledge or interest needed when they reach the higher-grade levels. This is found when utilizing terms such as constitutional, and even interpreting facts from news sources. Also, much of Civics is learned from the experiences one has; however, it is with the knowledge of how to interpret sources and information that is gained through Civics classes that allows a person to be better informed and spoken. This concern also paired with the feeling that other subject areas receive more attention and resources, especially during standardized testing time. Does Social Studies standardized testing need to occur for these standards to seem more important? Or does there need to be more curriculum structure to ensure teachers have a stronger direction of what to teach?

The last major area of concern from the data collected from the Civics surveys included finding a balance with Civics requirements. For example, the groups wondered if Civics education should be as necessary at the elementary and middle school levels as it is at the high school level due to the required standards. It was also a concern of how one would measure what level of Civics is best for students at each grade level; would there be a test at each grade level, or just a final test in high school? Finally, will having more Civics requirements affect items such as classroom rapport and climate? There may be unintended consequences by bringing in this new bill. Overall, many educators believe there are specific things about our nation that students should be able to identify, but don't always know (i.e. patriotic songs, states, representatives).

### **DEFINING CIVICS EDUCATION**

The groups defined Civics Education as "the knowledge and skills of possible citizens". These skills can include how the government is run and organized and the overall philosophy of the governing body. The goal of Civics Education is to help students create their own viewpoints from the past that can ultimately affect the present. Civics Education should offer opportunities to discuss and being actively involved in learning. There should be room to grow and fail. Above all, Civics Education needs to use the background of other Social Studies standards in order to build a clear connection to present day government. There should be a clear line to divide Civics, or active participation, and government, which is giving the facts of how a governing system works. Furthermore, Civics can look different to teachers at different grade levels.

Due to society's concern more so with personal rights instead of current politics and Civic responsibilities, Civics Education has become more of a hot topic among educators. Educators feel that Civics Education has gone backwards, and citizens are more concerned with their Civics social media presence instead of being involved with Civics community and societal clubs. It is unclear, however, what direction Civics Education is supposed to go in and how educators are to reach those goals. For example, how can teachers ensure the proper curriculum to produce the desired outcome of more young voters? A resource found was a book entitled Bowling Alone; this book further discusses the problem of Civics regression and possible solutions.

The group members also expressed that they felt the Civics standards were vague and needed more specificity and updates to accommodate the present issues. It was also found that elementary seemed to be more history-oriented, whereas as students grow older, they should be able to apply the historical knowledge gained to Civics education and how to be involved in their community, state, and nation. The goal is not to see the weakness of the Civics standards, but to adapt a curriculum with a holistic approach to cover the standards throughout K-12 education. The group further discussed the benefits of having consistent, long-term Civics curriculum adapted and used in K-12 versus having periodic Civics programs to enhance the Civics education already in place. They were concerned with the long-term versus the short-term investment of Civics education and its impact on student learning; could we implement both types? Looking to the 3CFramework could serve as a strong guide in this process. Even if students pass the class and graduate, how does a teacher ensure that the student really understands and can effectively use the elements of Civics?

In order to determine the direction of Civics Education, the groups proposed using data to measure “civics duty/behavior in schools” and the overall culture of Civics. It’s clear we must go to teachers and school districts first to gain this initial information, but it is worrisome due to the low numbers received in the initial survey given; can we make a survey mandatory for all Social Studies teachers and school administrators? Another key factor is to start with the end in mind: “we want adults who are informed citizens, know how to seek information, to vote, be productive in the state, national, political society,” so these pieces could be a start for Civics Education and research.

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## **THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE**

How do we move forward with Civics Education? The groups’ first step is to meet with the teachers through surveys in order to establish their Civics routines and concerns. The next step included forming partnerships with local government agencies and groups to increase internships, ROTC programs, and other Civics involvement; there is always room for change and growth at the local level. Within developing these partnerships with local government, there should also be a Social Studies network of a Professional Learning Communities, Professional Development Organizations, National Councils, etc. Facebook pages and Listserv groups could also be created for teachers to share ideas. Hosting education camps or other professional development to better equip Social Studies teachers to incorporate Civics in their curriculum could be beneficial. Researching what other states are doing in terms of Civics Education could help South Dakota determine where to start.

Another item to think about is how Civics Education opportunities, such as meeting with representatives, bringing students to legislature, and holding mock trials could be possible for districts that may be smaller, have a farther driving distance and/or that are on strict budgets.

Finally, the groups wanted to incorporate resources already used to enhance Civics Education. These resources included: Constitution Day awareness to build a partnership between K-12 and Post-Ed, a Civics checklist for education that allows schools to receive state recognition after a certain percentage has been completed, a Civics Literacy award to students with exceptional Civics knowledge, using voter registration as a requirement for government courses, becoming more involved with student activity groups, incorporating the professors within K-12 Civics Education programs such as “We The People”. Utilizing the naturalization test as a non-graded pre-test is a great conversation starter to help students realize the knowledge they should have as a U.S. citizen. Incorporating activities like this could also help ignite the desire to learn more about government in order to combat the “instant gratification” mindset found in students today. Can utilize events like Constitution Day to lead into a “Civics week” to build knowledge and awareness. There should also be more awareness of resources available for teacher use through groups such as museums and historical societies.

In order to hold schools accountable for their Civics education work, ideas came about to have state-wide surveys or rubrics for all schools to use and follow. There can also be awards for success in Civics education or for holding student or school competitions on Civics knowledge. To keep parents involved in the process, school districts can also include Civics minded items on student report cards (for example, contributed to classroom community, took on a leadership role, etc.).

One important factor to remember is that with any change done to Civics Education, there needs to be input that is measurable and output that is noticeable. An example of this is ensuring that everything done matches grade level appropriateness. Another factor to consider is ensuring that any emphasis on Civics should not take away from other subjects; this was a strong concern for elementary teachers, as well as middle school and high school teachers who had standardized testing on their plates. The groups also felt there is a need for stronger methods classes to prepare Social Studies teachers in college; it is found that a history major often doesn't have the background to teach Social Studies standards outside of history.

### **DEFINE CIVICS EDUCATION**

1. Teaches the art of living together with others in a community, what Aristotle would of called a polis. American civics education talks about how this is achieved in a society dedicated to freedom and equality.
2. Understand what being a citizen is (local, state, national, global, digital). Relationship between people and the government.
3. Knowledge and skills needed to be a productive citizen in a constitutional democracy; effective participation; awareness of opportunity; attitudes.
4. Learning how to be a productive citizen, taking part in society, know about country, city, state, and federal government and how it is run and participating with that knowledge.

5. Understanding of our government how it works, our history how it effects where we are going. Citizenship being/doing our part in large society.
6. Education about our country's past that shaped our country and how our country currently runs and operates our laws.
7. Builds knowledge, skills and attitudes for effective citizenship, understanding & participating in our constitutional republic.
8. Understanding the world around us and how to be part of it; how the world (state, local, nation) works together with citizens.
9. Helping learners to understand their rights & responsibilities as a citizen & to inspire them to be lifelong productive & contributing citizens in their community, state, nation, & global society.